

**Falco tinnunculus.** Kestrel

Kestrels were commonly seen up to 16,000 ft. Their main food was a single species of grasshopper that was very numerous on the meadow (*Anaptygus* sp. n.). I saw one kestrel carrying a small lizard, (*Lacerta* sp.). Below 14,000 ft. voles (*Alticola roylei*) were abundant, but I did not see a kestrel take one.

**Columba leuconata.** Snow Pigeon

Observed in flocks of about twenty. During the day, the birds came to the small streams at 13,000 ft. They were often seen flying rapidly from one cliff to another, usually above 14,000 ft. In the evenings they went to the cliffs at 17,000 ft. above the glacier where they probably roosted.

**Lophophorus impejanus.** Monal Pheasant

The Monal lived singly or in groups of two or three on the grassy slopes just above the tree-line. When flushed they invariably flew downwards across to the other side of the valley, uttering their curlew-like alarm whistle.

**Alectoris graeca.** Chukor

A single covey of nine chukor was disturbed on the glacier moraine at 15,000 ft.

**Tetraogallus himalayensis.** Snow Cock

The Snow Cock lives in considerable numbers on the meadow in family parties of 8-10. I followed one covey from sunrise to sunset. An hour before sunrise, eight birds passed over my tent at 15,000 ft., plummeting at great speed down the hillside and producing a harmonious low pitched whistle. This sound, caused by disturbance of the air, awoke me on four different mornings. Alighting on the meadow at about 14,000 ft., they began to feed, walking slowly up the hillside as they did so. By sunset they had reached the top of a ridge at 17,000 ft., where apparently, they roosted during the night. On the following morning, they descended an hour before sunrise to repeat the performance. On one occasion we disturbed two on the snow at 18,500 ft., and we found their footprints up to 19,000 ft. I never saw these birds fly up-hill or even horizontally, nor did I see them beat their wings except just before alighting. Every flight that I saw was at steep angle downwards, on rigid wings.

While feeding, the birds continually uttered their very striking call, a rising scale of four clearly whistled notes covering rather more than an octave.

P.O. BOX 397,  
ARUSHA, TANGANYIKA.

H. F. LAMPREY

## 28. THE SECONDARY SONG OF BIRDS

Mr. M. D. Lister's article on the above subject, in vol. 51 of this *Journal* (pp. 699-706), put me in mind of a number of occasions when I had heard birds quietly warbling to themselves an almost

endless melody bearing no resemblance to their normal songs or call notes. Instances found recorded in my notes are listed below. Locality, except when stated otherwise, Palghat taluk, Malabar, South India.

WHITEBROWED BULBUL (*Pycnonotus luteolus*)

2 May, 1948. Time? weather dull and cloudy. Bird sat alone in a bush and warbled for a long time in a low tone.

I had heard a similar warbling a number of times before that date, but had not associated it with this normally vociferous bird.

5 April, 1951. 3 p.m. Same as above. Among the birds mimicked were Large Cuckoo-Shrike, Chloropsis, Redvented Bulbul and Green Bee-eater.

During April 1951 the warbling was heard a number of times.

September, 1952. Warbling was heard often, but notes were not kept.

As a rule, this bird warbled only in the afternoons, and that too, in dull weather. It was the strange tendency of the bird to mimic birds of other species in the course of this quiet song that first attracted my attention. The bird normally sat well within some low, thick bush; only once was it found sitting 12 ft. above ground on a fairly exposed perch in a guava tree.

April 1952. During this month also the warbling of the White-browed Bulbul was heard off and on.

5 November, 1953. 2.10 p.m. Sunny, but film of clouds covering the sky. A few minutes later it became very dull. Three White-browed Bulbuls were on a neem tree where there was a Grey Drongo also. One of the bulbuls sang short snatches of the quiet song every now and then. Curiously enough, the bird was actively feeding all the time. It mimicked the Chloropsis, the Drongo, and some other birds. This was the only occasion when the Bulbul was heard singing like this when other birds of the same species were present. Perhaps it was this, and the fact that the bird was actively engaged in feeding, that made the song brief.

MAGPIE ROBIN (*Copsychus saularis*)

May-June, 1953. A pair of Magpie Robins went about in our compound feeding a couple of chicks. After the first week of June they were not seen or heard anywhere here till the 30th of September, when one bird put in a brief appearance. It uttered only a few short but loud notes.

1 October, 1953. Sky cloudy. 8 a.m. A single bird sat idly on a low perch and warbled for 3 minutes. Then it uttered loud, harsh notes.

2 October, 1953. Dull weather. A Magpie Robin uttered snatches of song loudly for a short while. On subsequent days only loud, harsh notes were heard. Two birds began to appear together.

6 October, 1953. 5.15 p.m. A male sat on a branch 6 to 7 ft. above ground and warbled in a subdued tone for a long time. It was an endless, intricate tune with imitations of bulbuls and mynas thrown in. The bird's bill was not open, but the throat rose and fell with the variations in tune. On seeing me the bird hopped away to another

branch, but resumed its song without delay. There did not appear to be any other Magpie Robin nearby.

For some days after this the bird's harsh scolding notes and loud, brief, staccato songs only were heard.

14 October, 1953. 9.30 a.m. Dull weather. A bird sat in the heart of a yellow oleander bush and warbled in an undertone for a long time. Another Magpie Robin, some thirty or forty yards away, was uttering short, loud call notes at the same time. The first bird's song would not have been audible to human ears at ten yards' distance.

15 October, 1953. 12.30 to 1.30 p.m. Dull weather. Two Magpie Robins were singing the quiet song, sitting less than 10 yards away from one another. They were in two different compounds with a narrow lane in between. There was no suggestion of rivalry in their songs.

I could watch only one of the birds. Noticed again that the mouth appeared to be closed, but the throat got inflated and deflated very conspicuously, and with great rapidity, while the bird sang. This bird once jumped down to the ground to catch an insect, but on returning to the perch took up the tune again. At first the bird was facing the other, hidden, songster, but after this sally, it faced the opposite direction. Never once, in the course of this prolonged duet, did either of the birds raise their voice or utter any harsh notes.

4 November, 1953. 7.15 to 7.30 a.m. Sunny, but not warm. A Magpie Robin male, sitting on neem tree branch 20 ft. above ground, burst into loud song. (From September 30th till this date the loud song referred to was a sharp, rapid *chee-which-which . . . , chee-chee-witch-chee-chi . . .*, and not at all the tuneful song uttered during the breeding season.) After a brief interval, it began the ultra-quiet song and went on for a minute. Again, bill was not open, throat rose and fell. When some other bird (an Iora?) uttered a few sharp notes, the Magpie Robin put an abrupt stop to its warbling and became alert. A couple of minutes later, it whistled a few bars of the staccato songs loudly and flew off to another neem tree some 15 yds. away. Some time after this, when I went that way to look at a Paradise Flycatcher, I heard the low warbling of the Magpie Robin again. Though I knew that the bird was somewhere there, and could hear the faint melody, it took me some time to discover the songster. It was sitting only 10 or 12 ft. away on the neem tree, 8 ft. above ground level.

Normally the Magpie Robin makes few movements when singing like this, but on this occasion the bird pressed its tail down, flicked it up, pressed it down again and so on a number of times. Catching sight of me, it jumped to another twig, sang for a time in the same quiet tone, and jumped rapidly from twig to twig until it was hidden by a thick branch. There it sat for a time warbling quietly, before flying away. On this occasion the bird uttered its nasal screech and the long single whistle also in the same subdued voice.

The maximum range at which a careful listener would be able to notice this quiet song may be put down as 25 to 30 ft.

INDIAN ROBIN (*Saxicoloides fulicata*)

16 October, 1953—Ottapalam, near Shoranur, Malabar. 5.30 p.m. Sunny. A solitary male sitting on a telephone pole near the only tree in an open stretch of paddy fields, warbled on in a low tone. Song was reminiscent of Magpie Robin's quiet song. The next day, at the same time (cloudy), bird was singing loudly from the same perch.

WHITETHROATED GROUND-THRUSH (*Geokichla citrina*)

5 May, 1945. 7 a.m. Cloudy, and drizzling lightly. Bird sat 5 ft. above ground on a teak sapling in mixed jungle and sang a very tuneful, but remarkably low melody for a long time. Found it difficult to discover the bird, though we were only a few yards away, because of the low quality of the song. The bird was not seen before or after this date in this wood.

SOUTHERN GREYBACKED SHRIKE (*Lanius schach*)

My note in the April 1952 issue of the *Journal* (Vol. 50, p. 666) describes the quiet song of this shrike, though the fact that the bird's voice, while engaged in mimicry, was very low was unfortunately omitted. That shrike's song would not have been heard distinctly at a distance of 30 yards, though its harsh call notes were audible 200 or even 300 yards away. I have not heard 'the pleasing little tinkling song' (Sálim Ali: *The Book of Indian Birds*) which the bird is said to utter during the breeding season, and so cannot say whether what I heard was distinct from the true song. The song I heard was very low and, as was pointed out in the earlier note, very rarely uttered.

The dates on which the shrike sang are given below.

15 May, 1947. 5 p.m. Sunny. Sang for 25 minutes.

16 May, 1947. 5 p.m. Sunny. Only for a very brief period.

19 May, 1947. 4.30 to 5.30 p.m. Almost all the time.

20 May, 1947. 5.05 to 5.11 p.m.

BROWN SHRIKE (*Lanius cristatus*)

29 December, 1949. Late evening. Bird sitting on bamboo twig uttered various low musical notes without a break for a long time. Song was very low and contained imitations of pipit's song and that of some other small birds (sunbirds? and warblers?). Could not at first believe that it was the Brown Shrike which was warbling and had to watch it closely to make sure that I was not deceived. Bill was not open at any time, but the bird's throat vibrated and rose and fell while it was singing, as described in the case of the Magpie Robin.

21 December, 1950. 5 p.m. A bird perched on low teak sapling, chirruped away merrily for about half an hour in an undertone. Song seemed to contain imitations of the Yellowthroated Sparrow's twittering.

BRAHMINY MYNAS (*Temenuchus pagodarum*) have been occasionally found sitting alone and very quietly singing to themselves. The only instance found recorded in my notes is the following.

8 May, 1945. 4 p.m. Cloudy. Drizzled for half an hour soon after.

COMMON MYNAS (*Acridotheres tristis*) have also been observed singing this quiet song, but I have not been able to find any definite records in my notes. Individuals of both species are invariably alone, sitting in the foliage of some mango or jak tree, while indulging in this *sotto voce* song. I am under the impression that they sing in this fashion only on hot afternoons when there is no breeze, and when the weather is very oppressive. Both species weave the call notes of other birds into their songs.

GREY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*, most probably.)

8 December, 1950, 3 p.m. A couple of Grey Wagtails sitting on roof twittered continuously for a long time. Whether only one or both birds sang could not be ascertained.

6 October, 1951. Morning. Cloudy. A bird sang a delightful series of tunes in an undertone.

13 October, 1953. 1.15 p.m. Heard a low twittering going on without a pause for a long time. Went out to find out where the bird was. There were two wagtails on the roof. They flew off the moment I came out, and so once again I was left wondering whether one or both birds had sung.

PURPLE SUNBIRD (*Cinnyris asiatica*)

Male Purple Sunbirds in eclipse plumage have often been found sitting 20 to 30 ft. above ground level, usually on the bare outer twig of a teak, and uttering a low twittering song which goes on for a long time without any appreciable pause. Other birds of the same species are not found at the time anywhere near this. Only two instances seem to have been recorded in my notes.

2 May, 1948. 12 noon. Sunny, but heavy clouds in the SW. Bird sat on moringa tree and sang for 5 to 10 minutes.

12 June, 1951. Noon. Cloudy. Bird was on top of tall teak sapling.

The male sunbirds seem to indulge in this quiet song more frequently than any of the other birds here mentioned. But only birds in non-breeding dress sing thus. It is invariably in the afternoon hours, between 12 and 4. Magpie Robins, Whitebrowed Bulbuls, the shrikes and the mynas make very few movements when singing the quiet song—the first two species having even a sort of absent-minded, dreamy air about them—but the sunbird does not keep still. It remains on the same perch, but goes on oscillating very rapidly. The bill appears closed, and is always pointed up at a 45-degree angle.

#### GENERAL REMARKS

As will be seen from the above notes, some birds which cannot be said to have any true song (Common Myna, Brahminy Myna and Whitebrowed Bulbul for example) have been found warbling in an undertone for surprisingly long periods.

Birds which normally do not indulge in mimicry (i.e., which do not loudly reproduce the call notes or songs of other birds) introduce such imitations freely into their subsong. Whether the Grey Shrike also mimics other birds only when singing in an undertone is not clear.

The tendency to give vent to this sort of low soliloquy seems to be greater when the weather is dull.

As a rule the birds are alone, inactive and in a brown study when they are singing the quiet song.

PALGHAT,  
December 9, 1953.

K. K. NEELAKANTAN

### 29. PYTHONS

It may interest your readers to know that in February last, after a cold wet day and night, I was out the next morning on an elephant after the sun had just got up, when I came across five full-grown pythons all on a large ant-hill, broken down to some extent by bear and elephant. They were lying criss-cross. I approached to within 15 yards or so, when they all gradually moved round and faced me. After having a good look at us for five minutes or so, they gradually slid down and disappeared in the surrounding growth. They all appeared to have new skins.

Further on, about 60 yds. away, was another full-grown python sunning itself. That gradually slid away and the mahout and I thought it was fully 15 ft. long.

That too had a new skin, i.e. light and shiny. I have never seen more than two pythons together before.

EVERGREEN COTTAGE,  
UPPER SHILLONG,  
SHILLONG, ASSAM, 1954.

FRANK NICHOLLS

### 30. NOTES ON THE FROG *RANA BREVICEPS* SCHNEIDER

(With a sketch)

Mr. Humayun Abdulali of the Bombay Natural History Society sent to us a small collection of nicely preserved frogs of *Rana breviceps* Schneider, collected at Trivandrum, Travancore, in November 1953 by Mr. J. C. Daniel, indicating the presence of a small but distinct tubercle at the tibiotarsal articulation. The collection consisted of seven females and one male. The specimens in the Reserve collection of the Zoological Survey of India were examined, but as there was no representative from Trivandrum, Dr. H. W. Parker of the British Museum of Natural History was approached if he could examine the material in his charge, especially the Trivandrum frogs referred to by Boulenger in his monograph<sup>1</sup>. At his request, Miss A. G. C. Grandison very kindly examined all the specimens of *R. breviceps* for the presence of the tubercle referred to above. We take this opportunity of thanking both of them for their help.

<sup>1</sup> Boulenger, G. A. (1920), *Rec. Ind. Mus.*, 20 : 105